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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: REACTION TO AMBASSADOR'S EXPULSION

REF: CARACAS 1274

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Classified By: DEPUTY POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Local reaction to the September 11 expulsion of Ambassador Duddy has largely been split along pro-Chavez and opposition lines. For the opposition and independent opinion-makers, the expulsion reinforces their view that an increasingly erratic Chavez is undermining the nation's interests. They have also conveyed public and private messages of solidarity with the Ambassador. President Chavez continues to defend his decision, and state media and his closest followers are echoing his arguments in support of the Bolivian government and against the "empire." Chavez and his supporters have also gone to considerable lengths to try to allay public concerns that the expulsion will lead to a further deterioration in bilateral relations with the United States and affect consular and commercial ties. End Summary.

Damage Control

¶2. (C) Five days after the expulsion, Chavez is still publicly defending his actions and trying to limit any potential political damage. He originally announced that he would not consider sending a new representative to Washington until there was a new government there that would "respect" Venezuela. At his September 16 press conference for international correspondents in Caracas, Chavez changed gears somewhat. He spoke warmly of his relationship with former President Clinton and said he planned to send an Ambassador under a new administration. The following day, Venezuelan United Socialist Party (PSUV) Vice President Alberto Muller Rojas wrote a column in pro-opposition daily El Nuevo Pais asserting that the expulsion was to demonstrate Chavez's displeasure with President Bush, not because of any "inappropriate conduct" by the Ambassador. He also emphasized that this did not represent a break in bilateral relations.

Expressions of Support for USG

¶3. (SBU) Pro-opposition press outlets have roundly criticized Chavez's September 11 decision to expel Ambassador Duddy, labeling it an attempt to divert public attention from problems at home. Globovision commentator Julio Cesar Pineda called the expulsion "abnormal" and Caracas daily El Nacional published an op-ed comparing Chavez to Zimbabwe's Mugabe.

Another op-ed titled "Foreign Shame" ridiculed Chavez's explanation for the decision. Several local analysts have questioned why Chavez would damage bilateral relations with the USG over events in Bolivia.

¶4. (C) Several opposition party activists, including from Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) and Podemos, called poloffs to express their regret and solidarity. Third-country diplomats, including almost all European and Latin American Ambassadors, expressed to Charge their private repudiation of this action and asked him to convey their sentiments to Ambassador and Mrs. Duddy. The civil society 2-D Movement issued a September 14 comunicuQ as a full-page notice in some Caracas dailies rejecting the expulsion and described Venezuela as being in the "eye of a hurricane." A student leader told poloffs that student activists considered holding a vigil in support of the Ambassador in front of the US Embassy, but ultimately decided that it would only help the BRV's efforts to discredit them. Post's protocol office and information resource center received numerous e-mails and phone calls from Venezuelans expressing their support for the Ambassador.

¶5. (C) In a September 12 press release, FEDECAMARAS Vice President Lope Mendoza called the decision "inconsiderate" and "unfortunate," especially coming on the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and emphasized his concern for its potential impact on bilateral commercial ties. In a subsequent personal e-mail to the Embassy, Mendoza urged Emboffs to continue working for the benefit of both countries and appeared to note with satisfaction that Chavez had called him a "pitiyankee" on Sunday's television broadcast of "Alo Presidente." The Caracas Chamber of Commerce and Consecomercio, one of the largest business federations, expressed sympathy and solidarity as well as similar concerns about the future trade relationship.

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Chavistas Praise Expulsion

¶6. (SBU) On September 12, President of the National Assembly Cilia Flores strongly affirmed her support for the expulsion, publicly claiming the Embassy has been behind all "destabilizing actions" since 2002, including the latest alleged coup plot. Echoing Chavez's original message, she added that relations could improve under a new government in Washington, provided it "respects" the BRV. The following day, the PSUV National Committee issued a comunicuQ lauding Chavez's decision and warning its followers to remain vigilant against the "imperialist onslaught" in Latin America. At a PSUV event held in support of Chavez, Miranda Governor Diosdado Cabello called the expulsion a sovereign decision and alleged that the USG was "without a doubt" behind a purported Chavez assassination plot. Prominent and obscure PSUV candidates for the November 23 gubernatorial and mayoral elections publicly backed the expulsion as part of their campaigns.

Comment

¶7. (C) The aftermath of the Ambassador's expulsion remains a prominent local news story in the independent press nearly a week after Chavez's sudden announcement. Chavez appears to be trying to contain the effects of his decision, perhaps so as not to unduly affect trade or consular ties. The Embassy has placed stories in the local media stressing that for the time being the Embassy continues to function normally, albeit at a lower political level without the Ambassador present. Interestingly, the expelled BRV Ambassador to Washington, Bernie Alvarez, has also stressed publicly that the BRV does not want to undermine ongoing commercial and consular relations. Perhaps the best indication that Chavez and his

closest advisors believe they may have gone a step too far is their haste to assure the public that they do not intend to break relations with the US, and that Venezuela can send a new Ambassador to Washington in January. End Comment.

CAULFIELD